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14. ABSTRACT

The Hollywood war film was an extremely popular genre both during and immediately after World War II. During this period conventions were established which secured the genre's popularity with audiences throughout the late 1960's, such as using the "Democratic Platoon" as a framing device to depict warfare as a patriotic and honorable undertaking. The ambiguous conclusion of the Korean War led both American society and filmmakers to question the legitimacy of war. This notion was explored further in film after the Vietnam War. The perceived illegitimacy of this conflict resulted in auteurs using the established techniques of the genre to create anti-war messages which present warfare as pointless and immoral. As the depiction of war changed during this time, so did the depiction of the warrior in American films. Film regarded the Vietnam War as immoral through its numerous depictions of veterans as criminals, whose current path was directly influenced by their war service. Sympathetic veterans were primarily presented as wounded warriors, whose participation in war unjustly left them with both physical and emotional scars. In the eighties, Reaganism permitted Rambo and other depictions of superhero veterans to return to Vietnam in order to symbolically win the war and restore morality to American participation in the conflict.

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Constant Character, Changing Nature: The Transformation of the Hollywood War Film, From 1949 to 1989

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Executive Summary

Title: Constant Character, Changing Nature: The Transformation of the Hollywood War Film, From 1949 to 1989

Author: HSI Special Agent Erik L. Schipul

Thesis: In his treatise, *On War*, military theorist Carl von Clausewitz stated that the character of war changes over time, while the nature of war is constant and enduring. In my analysis of Hollywood war films from the 1940's through the 1980's, I discovered the inverse of Clausewitz's renowned theory applies to war films. This is because war films employed the same conventions for forty years, while presenting two opposing views of war; namely, one as a righteous cause and the other as an immoral hell. Therefore, the character of war films remains the same, while the nature of war films change over time.

Discussion: The Hollywood war film was an extremely popular genre both during and immediately after World War II. During this period conventions were established which secured the genre's popularity with audiences throughout the late 1960's, such as using the "Democratic Platoon" as a framing device to depict warfare as a patriotic and honorable undertaking. The ambiguous conclusion of the Korean War led both American society and filmmakers to question the legitimacy of war. This notion was explored further in film after the Vietnam War. The perceived illegitimacy of this conflict resulted in auteurs using the established techniques of the genre to create anti-war messages which present warfare as pointless and immoral. As the depiction of war changed during this time, so did the depiction of the warrior in American films. Film regarded the Vietnam War as immoral through its numerous depictions of veterans as criminals, whose current path was directly influenced by their war service. Sympathetic veterans were primarily presented as wounded warriors, whose participation in war unjustly left them with both physical and emotional scars. In the eighties, Reaganism permitted Rambo and other depictions of superhero veterans to return to Vietnam in order to symbolically win the war and restore morality to American participation in the conflict.

Conclusion: The evidence suggests that the prominent factor which changed the nature of the Hollywood war film was the implied lack of morality in American wars beginning with the Korean War and culminating in the Vietnam conflict. Without the moral clarity provided by World War II, the nature of the war film changed over forty years. The genre morphed from a vehicle to celebrate war, to one condemning it, while using the identical archetypes inherent in both interpretations.

Introduction

Since 1898, motion pictures depicting warfare influenced their audiences' perceptions regarding war and warriors. Conversely, these war films also reflect attitudes inherent in the cultural imagination of American society during the time in which they were produced. Therefore, Hollywood war films produced during different eras have both shaped and been shaped by the changing values of their audience. This symbiotic relationship was never more evident than in the turbulent era of the 1960's and 1970's. The shifting values of American society during this time significantly affected the manner in which warfare was presented in Hollywood films. From 1949 to 1989 war films evolved from showing war as a romantic, moral cause during and after World War II to realistic, even cynical depictions of combat which reflected a negative attitude toward war in the 1970s and 1980s.

In analyzing Hollywood war films from the 1940s through the 1980s, I discovered that the inverse of military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's renowned concept applies to war films. In his treatise, *On War*, Clausewitz states the character of war, its distinguishing qualities, changes over time, but the nature of war, its essence, is constant and enduring. This paper suggests the character of war films is enduring, while the nature of war films morphs over time. This occurs because the war film continually employs the same conventions, such as presenting a military unit as a device through which warfare is depicted. But even though this same framing apparatus is used throughout forty years of film, it can present two opposing views of war, namely, one as a righteous, moral cause and the other as an immoral hell. Therefore, the nature of the Hollywood war film changes throughout the years, while its character remains the same.

The nature of war films varies because the nature of society changes. The America of 1950 is vastly different from the one that emerged in 1970. In 1950, the nation had recently won a "good war", but it was about to enter the "unknown war" and go through a Cultural Revolution in which class, racial, gender, and sexual issues would be confronted as the "bad war" began. But while certain segments of American society emerged from this period with new values, part of society retained its previous mores. Society was fractured into distinct segments, and war films were produced to cater to the specific values of these diverse sections. This was evident in the "Silent Majority's" embrace of *The Green Berets* (1968), the first major film to portray the Vietnam conflict. While the counterculture of the time rejected the motion picture's World War II sensibilities, those characteristics were exactly why the Silent Majority contributed to its box office success.

Film was the medium through which many Americans are initially exposed to war. While children in military families may have had more experience with circumstances regarding conflict, the images produced by Hollywood expose the nation's youth to what it may perceive to be the realities of war. Entire generations have grown up on steady diets of unrealistic war films which depicted combat in a romanticized light and based their perceptions of war on these images. When this generation arrived in Vietnam, they were thoroughly unprepared for the realities of war because Hollywood deceived them.[1] As Vietnam War veteran and amputee Ron Kovic said, "I gave my dead dick for John Wayne."[2]

The manner in which war and warriors are depicted in movies is relevant because that presentation both reflects and informs its audience. It can present a different interpretation of war to segments of society which may not necessarily agree with that view, but after seeing it presented on film, they may be educated on a different viewpoint which may inform their

sensibilities going forward. Therefore, war films have the ability not only to entertain their audience, but they also have the unique ability to transform their audience due to the medium's societal accessibility, a factor other information delivery mechanisms may not possess.

Context

The genre of the war film commenced with *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag* (1898). This modest film, produced in Manhattan, presents a reenactment of hands tearing the Spanish flag from a flagpole and raising the Stars and Stripes. Released immediately after the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, this first war film symbolically asked its audience to imagine those hands were their own, which stoked the viewer's nationalist fervor.[3] Thus began the genre's influence on its audience.

A bevy of war films followed in *Flag*'s wake. *The Capture of a Boer Battery* (1900) was filmed in New Jersey, while *The Battle of the Yalu* (1904) was produced on Long Island. Films depicting American struggles like the Revolutionary War and the Indian Wars quickly became popular with burgeoning audiences. These early films of the new medium exhibited both realism and sensationalism, which combined to provide a structure to the emerging genre, a genre which became a central attraction to audiences.[4]

The first epic war film was also one of the first American feature films, namely, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). This overtly racist film, which glorifies the Klu Klux Klan, depicts the Civil War and its aftermath. Griffith consulted with West Point faculty and the photography of Matthew Brady to sculpt his momentous battle scene.[5] *Nation* was the first film to be screened at the White House; President Woodrow Wilson, a PhD holder in history, allegedly praised the film, saying it was "like writing history with lightning."[6]

As World War I began in Europe, the ethnic diversity and isolationist stance of the United States provided a challenging dilemma for war filmmakers. Before America's entry into the war, films promoting neutrality, such as *Be Neutral* (1914) and *Civilization* (1916), expressed unambiguous statements of passivity. On the other hand, films like *Bullets and Brown Eyes* (1916) advocated an agenda of war preparedness. Once the United States entered World War I, the Federal Government's Committee on Public Information, in addition to creating its own films, initiated cooperation with film companies to produce propaganda supporting the war in such films as the Mary Pickford vehicle *The Little American* (1917), which focused on the brutality of German soldiers.[7] This collaboration between the government and film companies was the initial foray into a fluctuating relationship which continues to this day.

Movies released during World War I concentrated on two dominant themes: American support for the war at home, and the conflict itself. Films like *Johanna Enlists* (1918) demonstrated the effect the war had on local communities, while other "slacker" films, such as *Shame* (1917) attempted to shame draft evaders into military service. Popular films detailing the war itself employed decidedly anti-German themes, like Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918), which presented the Hun as a barbaric savage.[8]

The period between the two World Wars produced an abundance of motion pictures which provided anti-war sentiments. The 1920's saw romanticized war epics such as King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925) and William Wellman's *Wings* (1927), which won the first Academy Award for Best Picture. But after the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression changed American society's cultural context, and such anti-war films like Howard Hughes' *Hells Angels* (1930) and Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) presented the soldier as a victim of militarism and brought a new mentality to the war film.[9]

This cycle of war films petered out once Adolph Hitler's aggression in Europe came to a head. Because of America's isolationist stance, as well as the profits inherent in European markets, many film studios initially assumed producing films advocating U.S. intervention in foreign wars would be unprofitable.[10] Warner Brothers studio, on the other hand, produced such anti-Nazi films as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), and Charlie Chaplin self-financed his biggest box office success, the seminal *The Great Dictator*, which satirized a fictional despot based on Hitler. War films containing aggressively interventionist themes demonstrated significant profitability when *The Fighting 69th* (1940) and *Sergeant York* (1941) were released to much acclaim when they presented war as a moral necessity while facing an immoral enemy.[11]

Upon reviewing this situation in Hollywood, government officials who favored isolationism believed motion pictures became too pro-military and anti-German. In September of 1941, a special Senate subcommittee was formed to investigate Hollywood film propaganda. Once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, the government reversed its position in order to collaborate again with Hollywood to produce pro-war films.[12]

The Office of War Information (OWI) created the Bureau of Motion Pictures to collaborate with Hollywood in order to insert propaganda praising the war effort into American films during World War II.[13] The OWI strictly reviewed screenplays of every genre to ensure the Allies were portrayed positively. Hollywood did not oppose this censorship because it assisted in providing the public with the patriotic films it craved at the time. But with government censorship also came government support for motion pictures. The military assets the government provided to filmmakers, such as personnel and equipment, significantly offset the cost of such films. This healthy collaboration between the government and the film industry

led to extremely patriotic films which gratified audiences, produced support for the war, and created vast profits for the film studios.[14]

The prevalent type of war film produced in this environment of mutual cooperation was the "unit picture." These films established the exploitable paradigms of the "Democratic Platoon," conventions which continue to be used today. Movies like *Bataan* (1943) and *The Guadalcanal Diary* (1943) display the moral, patriotic Americans who fought the evil of the Axis powers. The multinational, integrated units presented in these films did not reflect realities, but gratified the American Experiment as a success because audiences needed to believe in them.[15] These types of films made after the war, like *Battleground* (1949), celebrated America's ethical victory over a corrupt threat and softened the authenticities of war with tales of heroism and valor, which portrayed an America true to its ideals, if not its reality.[16]

The body of this paper will examine how 20th Century war and warriors were presented in the Hollywood war films from the World War II era through the post-Vietnam era into the 1980's and analyze what societal shifts prompted those changes to occur.

Body

Upon the conclusion of World War II, the government's relationship with Hollywood began to deteriorate in 1947 when the House of Un-American Activities Committee's communist witch-hunts resulted in the film industry's Blacklist, which barred hundreds of movie professionals from working in Hollywood, due to alleged communist ties. The next year saw the verdict of the Paramount Decision, a U.S. Supreme Court antitrust case which prevented the movie studios from owning their own theatres and holding exclusivity rights on which theatres could show their films. This event contributed to the rise of independent film production, the

breakdown of the Studio System, and the weakening of the Hays Production Code, which censored movies. When government participation in war films concluded, it allowed for different perspectives of war on film.

The Korean War lasted from 1950 to 1953, and with its indecisive conclusion, questions were raised by both American society and Hollywood about the military and war itself. In the 1950's, war films were being made which showed the horrors of war and questioned its legitimacy. War films like Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) which detailed abuse of power, and Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951) contained vehemently anti-war themes, questioned the moral clarity of previous war films, and reflected the racial tension of the time. [17] Other war films of the period presented cultural issues, such as racism in *Home of the Brave* and the psychological effects of war on warriors in *12 O'Clock High* (1949). These films reflected post-war American society because such issues began to present themselves among the populace. The 1950's war film also questioned authority, with the depiction of abusive officers in *From Here to Eternity* (1953). *The Caine Mutiny* (1954) examined deficits in leadership and loyalty. And the anti-authoritarian *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) depicted human strengths and weakness on both sides of the conflict. *Pork Chop Hill* (1959) displayed the futility of combat for political gain, and Communists brainwashed an American soldier into political assassination in John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). While Communist psychological operations were required to force a Korean War veteran to murder in *The Manchurian Candidate*, in Frankenheimer's *Black Sunday* (1977), it is the Vietnam War veteran's military experience which causes him to plot a presidential assassination and the murder of thousands with a weapon of mass destruction.

In the 1960's, war films were still profitable and because of the advancements in television technology in the fifties and sixties, the studios began to make grandiose epics in order to compete with this emerging medium.[18] War epics were lengthy in time, and had astronomical budgets, numerous stars, as well as immense, sometimes convoluted story lines. Such films showed war in a patriotic light in motion pictures like *The Longest Day* (1962), *Battle of the Bulge* (1965), and *Is Paris Burning?* (1966), while also humanizing the enemy. These WWII epics still remained somewhat popular into the seventies, which is evidenced by such films as *Midway* (1976) and *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), an epic whose anti-war message made allusions to Vietnam War issues through its depictions of superfluous Allied casualties, insubordination, and lack of effective leadership. Some war epics of the seventies displayed the failures of military organization because the genre registered the experience of losing the war in Vietnam. And although WWII remained a source of redemptive tales of war, even this most reassuring of wars was subject to critical reinterpretation.[19] The sixties also saw an influx of adventure films with wartime themes, such as *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *The Great Escape* (1963), and the Clint Eastwood vehicle *Kelly's Heroes* (1970), which diluted the solemnity of war in order to accommodate the diverging tastes of an increasingly segmented society.

From the Spanish-American War through the Korean War, numerous war films were produced which presented the current conflict of the time. It is notable that only one major American motion picture was produced during the Vietnam conflict which displayed warfare in that arena. In 1968, John Wayne was the first person in Hollywood to make a combat film about Vietnam when he directed and starred in *The Green Berets*. Wayne was the embodiment of American patriotic sentiment through his World War II films like *They Were Expendable* (1945) and *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), and refused to acknowledge the complexities of the Vietnam

conflict in his new film. *The Green Berets* was about Vietnam but employed all the conventions of a World War II film. The film also had many flaws, like the sun setting in the east and the use of a Georgia pine forest, which looks nothing like the jungles of Vietnam. Even though the film was pro-Vietnam War, Wayne still had trouble getting government assistance on the film. To gain this required asset, the Duke made changes to the script so that it reflected what Green Berets actually did in the conflict, which was reconnaissance, surveillance, advice, and training to host country nationals.[20]

What Nixon dubbed "The Silent Majority" positively responded to the film, making it a box-office success. Members of the military embraced the film because it was the one Vietnam film which showed undeniable support for the troops. Wayne wanted people in America and around the world to know that it was very necessary for American troops to be in Vietnam in order to preserve freedom and stop the domino effect.[21] Yet, in those times of great social upheaval, it didn't seem as if anyone outside of Wayne's demographic was listening as critics and counterculturalists panned the film because it was out of date and did not reflect the complexities of the actual conflict in Vietnam.[22]

Vietnam's disorienting effect on American society and the indeterminate nature of this conflict, which could not be won or abandoned, resulted in filmmakers' inability to discover an appropriate format to present the war to a mass audience. [23] Because of this and the division of public opinion, Hollywood film studios stayed away from the subject of Vietnam as the conflict was being fought. Another contributing factor in Hollywood's dismissal of Vietnam was that the studios would only receive the much needed support of the Pentagon if the film was pro-Vietnam War. Otherwise, to produce a Vietnam War film was likely to be too expensive to be profitable.[24] The main factor which contributed to Hollywood's inattention to Vietnam was

television. Every night, actual footage of the conflict was broadcast into America's living rooms via the nightly news. No Vietnam War film could compete with the realities of the war which audiences were freely exposed to on a daily basis through television.[25] Another aspect which influenced this trend was the breakdown of the Hollywood studio system in the early 1960s. Movie talent was no longer restricted by long-term studio contracts and worked independently. This also led to an influx of liberal studio executives who opposed U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict.[26]

Yet it was this new filmmaking environment which nurtured the creativity of the New Hollywood and produced the first films which critically examined the Vietnam conflict in the late 1970s. In the late 1960's, baby boomer, film-school educated auteurs invaded Hollywood with the intention of rendering the studio system obsolete by enhancing the art of film and freeing it from the shackles of commerce.[27] This new attitude, along with the institution of the Motion Picture Association of America film rating system, and the arrival of new filmmaking technology which simplified location shooting, resulted in an inventive filmmaking environment which produced such classic films as *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *The Last Picture Show* (1971). These young filmmakers made character-driven movies for their peers and broke from the archetypes of the past in order to introduce a new film-going experience to audiences.

In 1970, the New Hollywood films *Catch-22* and *M*A*S*H* were released. These war films were set in World War II and the Korean War, respectively, but dealt with Vietnam-related issues such as depicting the military as close-minded institutions with an absurd bureaucracy.[28] *Patton* (1970) either depicted everything wrong with the military or presented the honorable aspects of military service, depending on the disposition of the viewer. This "film's moral ambiguity reflected America's own individual feelings about Vietnam."[29] The new film ratings

system allowed these films the freedom to depict war as tragedy when they displayed the gory and bloody victims of conflict as exemplified by the World War II allegorical film, *Too Late the Hero* (1970). For years, such symbolic representation was as close as the war film came to a critical portrayal of the array of issues raised by the Vietnam War, since it was more convenient to present these themes to a fragmented audience under the veil of previous conflicts because it could appeal to a broader audience. By the early seventies, Hollywood's propaganda machine was as effective in discouraging America's support for war as it had once been for encouraging it.[30]

The character of war was altered in the Vietnam conflict, through its use of irregular, guerilla warfare, napalm, and vague strategic objectives. And this character change prompted a change in the nature of the Hollywood war film. The uncensored and bloody images of the conflict which Americans saw on television daily also contributed to this transformation.[31] Through these images, many citizens concluded war was not a glorious undertaking, but an immoral and physical hell.[32] This exposure had a profound influence on Americans and many could not justify the nation's participation in such an endeavor.[33] The progressive ideas, civil unrest, and social change which defined the 1960s culminated in a prolonged period of reevaluation in the seventies after Watergate.[34] Another contributing factor in this alteration was that many filmmakers possessed personal anti-Vietnam sentiments and wanted to present the war as the dilemma they interpreted it to be by displaying conflict in a more realistic fashion.[35] Thus, the comparative tameness of the patriotic World War II film would no longer suffice with audiences who were treated to a more realistic depiction of warfare in the cinema of the late seventies.

In 1978, three years after the fall of Saigon, the first Vietnam combat films were released to cinemas throughout the United States. *The Boys in Company C* and *Go Tell the Spartans*, starring Burt Lancaster, offered novel presentations of warfare which diverged from the nature of previous films depicting war. These movies were different in that they showed soldier substance abuse, realistic depictions of the gore and blood of battle, and assumed the incompetency of officers, while adhering to the conventions of the "Democratic Platoon." *Spartans* is notable for delving into the causes and effects of the war while showing the hubris and naiveté which shaped the American war effort.[36] The Vietnam War and these initial Vietnam combat films influenced subsequent movies depicting earlier conflicts, such as Fuller's revisionist World War II treatise *The Big Red One* (1980), which starred Lee Marvin and presented war as a constant and futile struggle for individual survival.

Francis Ford Coppala's Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* was released in 1979. This film was the result of society's search for new ways to describe war after the tensions caused by the conflict for America in the sixties and seventies.[37] The film shows war in the different economic context of the New Hollywood, which combines epic scale filmmaking, seen in such films as *The Longest Day* (1962), with a cynical and critical perspective.[38] It also offers a collective retreat into metaphysics, with the view of war as a darkness of the soul. This brutal, ironic, and poetic film captures the horrors of war and demonstrates the depravity of absolute military power.[39] This new interpretation of war resulted in a wide-ranging and questioning war film which travels beyond the embedded foundational myths employed by the genre prior to the Vietnam conflict.[40]

The next significant combat film was Vietnam veteran Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). He also employs the "Democratic Platoon" structure. The film features a Christ figure torn

between good and evil as represented by conflicting sides of his platoon. Here the soldiers realistically fight not only the glimpsed enemy, but each other as well. This is a divergence from the World War II film where the platoon pursues the ideological goal of integration, as the platoon in Vietnam is divided and disintegrating.[41]

Platoon and *Hamburger Hill* (1987) also used filmmaking techniques which emulated the look and feel of American news coverage. In addition to *Platoon*'s documentary style of shooting and editing, it also featured a character's collision with the camera, which does not break the imaginary boundary between the film and the audience (known as the Fourth Wall), so much as it encourages the audience's acceptance of its authenticity.[42] *Hamburger Hill* uses documentary camera angles and characters filming battle in order to fashion this change created by the uniqueness of the Vietnam conflict.

The profitable success of *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill* was followed by the release of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), which employed realism in their presentation to varying degrees. The central theme of Kubrick's film is the dehumanization of the American Marine. This is in stark contrast to earlier war motion pictures which dehumanize the enemy.

This new wave of combat films showed the soldier in a human light. He wasn't a hero charging up a hill like John Wayne; he fought to stay alive. The warriors depicted in these films didn't know why they were in Vietnam or what they were fighting for. They did know there were no other options for them. The soldiers represented by these films did not care about patriotism, politics, or fighting the good fight like the soldiers in World War II films, because they believed the Vietnam War was wrong. Those values faded through the increasing disintegration of the American memory and experience of war.[43]

To fully appreciate war films made after the Vietnam conflict the viewer must consider the post-war celebration in World War II films. That formula cannot be applied to Vietnam because of the impact on America of the loss of the war to a third world country. Hollywood felt complicit, since it basically fooled Americans about war in films from the forties through the sixties. So when Hollywood came to make war films in the Vietnam cycle, the industry was implicitly telling the audience to disregard what they presented previously because war is horrible and deadly and can have no moral meaning.[44]

War films previous to Vietnam portrayed the American Dream of equality and justice, while showing that combat is contradictory in that it is simultaneously horrifying and glorious. WWII films emphasized those qualities because when they showed demise, they showed that death has moral compensation,[45] because an ethical objective was achieved. Conversely, in Vietnam War films, there was no glory in combat because the characters are fighting what they perceive as an immoral war.

The Vietnam conflict provided a unique opportunity for Hollywood to further examine the warrior upon his return home as a veteran. Hollywood dealt with the readjustments returning veterans must make after World War II in a handful of films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *The Men* (1950), and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956). In fact, *The Men* became the model for some Vietnam era films showcasing paralyzed soldiers.[46] These World War II films showcased veterans overcoming psychological and physical injuries in order to readjust into a society which was grateful for their war service. But the Vietnam veteran faced a different environment when he returned home, one that did not embrace him or appreciate his service. Many films after the Second World War contained characters that were veterans, but whether they were private eyes or criminals, their status as a veteran was just one aspect of their

character. For the returning Vietnam veteran, his service defined him and directly caused him to be portrayed in film as insane and/or criminal, sympathetically disabled, or as a superhero because he dealt with the traumatic influences of war through those mechanisms.

Because American society did not fully understand the Vietnam conflict, and Americans were influenced by horrific images of war, audiences readily accepted that the suffering the veteran experienced would turn him insane or into a criminal because he could not emotionally handle the experience of war. While World War II films had distinct heroes and villains fighting for good and evil, the Vietnam War film blurred, erased, or even reversed those roles because society was divided on who the actual enemy was in Vietnam.[47] Some Americans viewed the American serviceman as the enemy, which was reflected in his portrayal as a psychotic in films of the 1970s like *Open Season* (1974). Wars are, by definition, disturbing; veterans symbolized that disturbance in the violent medium of American film.[48]

The Manchurian Candidate (1962) showed the audience a Korean War veteran returning home as an assassin, brainwashed by the enemy. When it came to the portrayal of Vietnam War veterans as unstable killers, it was not because the enemy forced him to kill. Rather, it was because his war service so disturbed him, his only way to deal with his issues was to break from societal norms. Little motivation was given to justify the criminal veterans depicted in film because the audience had a preconception that the corrupt war created immoral men.

The war veteran was portrayed as mentally disturbed or as a criminal in film because his experience in the war directly caused this behavior. In Brian DePalma's *Casualties of War* (1989), the stress of combat was so immediate it turned soldiers into war criminals who committed kidnap, rape, and murder in theatre. In the veteran film, the past warrior could not

retain steady employment nor sustain a healthy relationship with women. Psychological factors induced by his war service, such as restlessness, loneliness, and addiction caused him to lash out against the society which forced him to Vietnam and did not accept him back.

The veteran in film therefore retreated from the society which shunned him into a life of crime, which was the one road of employment his Vietnam service qualified him for. The criminal veteran in film used the skills he acquired in Vietnam to commit murder, rape, robbery, drug and weapons trafficking, extortion, and racketeering. While the veteran may not necessarily have discovered peace in the criminal underworld, he did find purpose and acceptance, which temporarily rectified the emotional wounds he suffered in the war.

The veteran created his own outlaw motorcycle club in *The Angels from Hell* (1968). Other veteran gangs committed murder and rape in *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* (1972) and *Night Flowers* (1979). They lashed out at the government which betrayed them through attempted presidential assassination in *Black Sunday* (1977). Or they use war-acquired skills to kill for profit as an assassin in *The Stone Killer* (1973) and *The Package* (1989).

In Martin Scorcese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), veteran Travis Brickle's war experience drove him into madness as a criminal vigilante.[49] Various films depicted veteran mental illness in a sympathetic fashion. Veterans in *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) could not distinguish between reality and flashbacks, and confronted monsters in both.[50] Two 1989 releases, *In Country* and *Jacknife*, showed the long term, psychological effects Vietnam had on some soldiers and their struggle for normalcy. Those veterans failed to properly deal with post-traumatic stress disorder through self-medication. Alan Parker's 1984 film, *Birdy*, also showed how serving in Vietnam could have a devastating effect on the mental condition of a young American male.

It seems that a normal, well-adjusted Vietnam veteran was the only kind not to be found in movies.[51] Veterans with suicidal tendencies are featured in films like *Cutter's Way* (1981). The psychological ailments which veterans suffer in film demonstrate how the veteran is unable to cope with what he has both seen and participated in during the war. Therefore, he cannot adjust to a normal life once he returns home, so he contemplates suicide, or reverts to the way he was in Vietnam and begins "raping and killing" once again.[52] These film stereotypes of veterans serve as a basis for commencing the screen action craved by audiences and does not reflect the reality of the 2.5 million vets who returned from the war as sane family men with stable jobs.[53] These films portray the veteran as embodying the traumatic experience of war and contaminating America upon his return home.[54] If anything, these criminal depictions of veterans reflect the misconceptions which American society had of the returning veteran in the 1970s.

The veteran was also portrayed on film as a wounded warrior, whose disability elicits sympathy from the audience. Director Hal Asby's 1978 motion picture, *Coming Home*, paved the way for this subgenre of film. In the film, Jon Voight plays a paralyzed veteran of Vietnam who can only deal with his situation through alcohol abuse. But the love of "Hanoi Jane" Fonda's character subsequently transforms him into an antiwar activist, as Fonda's veteran husband commits suicide.

1978 also saw the release of Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, a film which dealt with both the physical and emotional wounds of Vietnam. One telling scene depicted a paralyzed veteran whose wife cannot accept the fact that he is disabled, and keeps sending him socks while he is in the Veterans Affairs hospital, even though he doesn't have any feet. In film, "only those

veterans who have suffered greatly and will never again be physically whole are worthy of the compassion of the viewer and of an ungrateful nation."[55]

The ambiguous environment created by the Vietnam conflict, in which the justification of war was questioned, provided the means for filmmakers to revisit other wars with a critical viewpoint. Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971) features a dismembered, faceless World War I veteran who can only communicate through tapping Morse code. The film concludes by showing damning war casualty statistics. According to movie historian Emmett Early, "The film is bitter and unyielding in its confrontation about the suffering that war brings to human beings, as contrasted with the pomp and arrogance of the leaders."[56]

Being paralyzed was not the only disability that provoked compassion from audiences. Blind veterans were the subject of *Ordinary Heroes* (1985) and *Blind Fury* (1989). The effects Agent Orange had on soldiers, like cancer, sterilization, and birth defects were some of the themes of *First Blood* (1982), *Bell Diamond* (1987), and *Combat Shock* (1986), respectively. These films indict the soldier for being in Vietnam in the first place and grandstandingly denounce the Pentagon and chemical companies for using chemical warfare.[57]

Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* was released in 1989. The film presents the true story of Ron Kovic, who went from being a naïve, gung-ho Marine recruit to a wheel-chair-bound crusader against the Vietnam War. This film exhibits themes of guilt, redemption, and the realities of coping with disability coupled with the betrayal of your once beloved country. Exhibited here is a new American hero, one who questions authority and speaks his mind. The film shows how the moral certainty of an earlier age is gone forever, replaced with a series of complex questions, reflecting a nation more culturally and socially diverse than ever before.[58]

This character blames the government for his disability because it sent him to Vietnam. This is in stark contrast to the films dealing with disability made after World War II, in which the veteran was reconciled with his disability because it was the moral sacrifice to make. With Vietnam, that same justification could not be accepted.

In *Apocalypse Now*, the Martin Sheen character is a warrior who returned home and was alienated from society and returned to Vietnam for closure. He was obsessed with Vietnam and his return there is a move to recuperate America's credibility.[59] This portrayal allows for the examination of the veteran's quest for psychological order in achieving resolution while avoiding American military defeat in Vietnam.[60] This narrative framework also informs the portrayal of the veteran as a superhero, finally accomplishing the closure of victory, whether it is on the streets of America or back in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

The initial representation of the veteran as a superhero commenced with the Billy Jack series, which began with *The Losers* (1967). The character of Billy Jack is a former Green Beret who transforms into a reluctant hero by defending the innocent. This character despised his war service and succeeds not because he is a Vietnam veteran, but in spite of it, in order to become an antiestablishment, counterculture hero.[61]

More veteran superhero films were released in the seventies, like the *Walking Tall* (1973) series and *Rolling Thunder* (1977); action movies featuring veterans performing unrealistic heroic acts. These films also exhibit themes of revenge, in which the hero not only gets back at those who wronged him, but also symbolically gets revenge on the government which sent him to war. At times the veteran superhero film is difficult to distinguish from the criminal veteran

film, as they at times employ similar methods; the difference being that in the superhero film the veteran is attempting to regain his morality which he lost during the war.

The Rambo film series, beginning with *First Blood* (1982), achieved new heights for the veteran superhero due to the changing American political environment of eighties Reaganism, which embraced U.S. military strength and the worldwide projection of power.[62] The first film finds Sylvester Stallone's character of John Rambo fighting against a society which refused to understand or accept him as a veteran.

The second film in the franchise, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1986) is the epitome of this subgenre. This movie finds Rambo returning to Vietnam to rescue American prisoners of war. Before embarking on his hero's journey, Rambo asks, "Do we get to win this time?" The answer is yes, because in the anti-communist 1980s, Ronald Reagan was trying to return morality to Vietnam.[63] This effort was embodied by Rambo, Chuck Norris's Colonel Braddock in the *Missing in Action* (1984) series, and other characters in a host of films that permeated the cinema landscape of the 1980s in which veterans returned to Vietnam in order to rescue POW's and symbolically win the Vietnam War. This attempt to rewrite history is not new, as both Germany and Japan reworked their pasts in the post-World War II era to justify their involvement in the war, just as America ideologically did in the eighties with Vietnam.[64]

The common theme of these films and *Uncommon Valor* (1983) is that the veteran returns to rescue the helpless soldiers he left behind. This is in stark contrast with World War II POW films, like *The Great Escape* (1963), where the soldiers escaped on their own, with no assistance. This is because America won World War II and did not have to return in order to win it again. In the films of the 80's the superhero becomes one with nature and employs guerilla

tactics to reclaim his masculinity through accomplishing his mission, which ironically makes the audience identify with the guerilla Vietcong, who victimized the hero initially.[65]

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the prominent factor which changed the nature of the Hollywood war film was the implied lack of morality in American wars beginning with the Korean War and culminating in the Vietnam conflict. The absolutely evil enemy of World War II was gone, replaced by more balanced views of social and moral complexities of the modern age.[66] Without this moral simplicity, the nature of the war film changed from the forties to the eighties, morphing from a vehicle which celebrated war, to one that condemned it.

The nature of the war film changed over time in varying degrees based on the nature of the current conflict the nation was embroiled in. The patriotic films of WWI soon gave way to the antiwar films of the thirties, and the propaganda films of WWII were supplanted by the ambiguous war films of the seventies which led to the Rambo films of the eighties, which glorified warfare once again. This cyclical nature is relevant today because the nation is currently embroiled in another drawn out conflict which is losing support from American society with every year it continues. The volunteer military embraces this generation of American youth exposed to a steady diet of video games depicting war in a trivial manner reminiscent of the John Wayne war films of the 1940's. While these video games, such as the *Call of Duty* (2003) series, are directly descended from the realistic war films made since the 1970s, an influx of narratives objectively presenting the nature and character of war must also be made and consumed to prevent war depicting media from completing a cyclical progression in which it regresses to the predominantly idealized form it once was. Recent war films such as *Captain America* (2011),

Act of Valor (2012), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) tend to glorify conflict, while also attempting to present a balanced view of the moral dilemmas inherent in war. This reconciliation of opposing values presents a curious and distinct path forward for the nature of the war film which embraces its conflicted past to present a novel discourse for the future.

Endnotes

[1] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*, Video, directed by Lawrence Pitkethly. (1994; Public Broadcasting Service).
[2] Gary Wills, *John Wayne's America* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 13.
[3] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema* (New York: Wallflower, 2006), 11.
[4] Westwell, 12.
[5] Michael Lee Lanning, *Vietnam at the Movies* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 9.
[6] John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 272.
[7] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*, DVD, directed by Edith Becker. (1998; Van Ness, Foxstar, American Movie Classics, 1998).
[8] Lanning, 12.
[9] Westwell, 21.
[10] Westwell, 27.
[11] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[12] Lanning, 19.
[13] Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, eds., *Hollywood's America: United States History Through Its Films* (New York: Brandywine Press, 1996), 158.
[14] Mike Mayo, *Videohound's War Movies: Classic Conflicts on Film* (Woodbridge, CT: Visible Ink Press, 1999), xix.
[15] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*
[16] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*
[17] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*
[18] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[19] Westwell, 69.
[20] Lawrence Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the Military Image in Film* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 249.
[21] Suid, 248.
[22] Marilyn J. Matelski and Nancy Lynch Street, eds., *War and Film in America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003), 38.
[23] Julian Smith, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 22.
[24] David Robb, *Operation Hollywood* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 14.
[25] Lanning, 45.
[26] Lanning, 45.
[27] Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 17.
[28] Mayo, 470.
[29] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[30] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[31] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[32] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[33] Mayo, 482.
[34] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[35] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*
[36] Lanning, 92.
[37] Westwell, 68.
[38] Westwell, 62.
[39] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[40] Westwell, 68.
[41] Westwell, 80.
[42] Westwell, 78.
[43] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*
[44] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*

[45] *American Cinema: The Combat Film*
[46] Suid, 206.
[47] Lanning, 74.
[48] Emmett Early, *The War Veteran in Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland &Company, 2003), 232.
[49] Early, 191.
[50] Lanning, 80.
[51] Lanning, 80.
[52] Lanning, 81.
[53] Lanning, 83.
[54] Westwell, 64.
[55] Lanning, 132.
[56] Early, 26.
[57] Lanning, 132.
[58] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*
[59] Westwell, 64.
[60] Westwell, 64.
[61] Lanning, 109.
[62] Lanning, 108.
[63] Westwell, 70.
[64] Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American* Film (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 101.
[65] Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 524.
[66] *Cinema Combat: Hollywood Goes to War*

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